

WHICH RITE

IS RIGHT?

**Does a Priest have the
right to choose which Rite
of Holy Week to observe?**



By Fr. Kevin Vallancourt

One of the divisive points among traditional Catholic clergy is the pastoral approach to the rites of Holy Week — which version should be observed in the various chapels? Fr. Ricossa wrote a detailed study (available at *traditionalmass.org*) outlining his reason for assuming the responsibility to abandon the liturgical revisions promulgated during the reign of Pope Pius XII. For him, *all* the revisions, including the “new” Psalter, are to be rejected. Father does a good job explaining his concerns, backing them up with historical and liturgical data. However, there are some points he did not consider. This is the purpose of this tract.

Granting all that Fr. Ricossa has said about the undermining of the true Liturgical Movement by the innovators and the modernists prior to Vatican II, it should be added that there was a deliberate campaign among these people to hide *Mediator Dei* from the Catholic world, as they went about their plan. On visiting a seminary in France in 1953 where the first attempts at the Novus Ordo were being both taught

and implemented (although secretly), Annibale Bugnini made a favorable comment about them, adding: "The best thing I can do for you right now is to return to Rome and say nothing of what I have seen." The Liturgical Commission called for in *Mediator Dei*, when established, purposely did not discuss that encyclical nor seek to have it translated and dispersed throughout the Catholic world. So, yes, there were problems and this was the liturgical climate into which the revised rites of Holy Week were "born".

It is important that this preamble be given before the next few lines are written, because it has often been said that those who follow the revised rites are liturgically naive and don't understand the sabotage of the Liturgical Movement. "If they did," others say, "they would not follow those modernized rites." On the contrary, the seriousness of the situation is well understood by both sides. However, there are some other very pertinent points that must be raised, not necessarily in defense of the new rites, but in explaining why many traditional clerics observe them:

1. The most important one is that these revisions are *mandated*. Yes, there was a period of time (1951-1953) when they were held in certain dioceses as an experiment (an unfortunate term) to test the pastoral value, not only in the revised rites,

but also in the observance of the new times of day for the observance of these rites. When favorable reports were returned, Pope Pius XII established a special commission of the Cardinals of the Congregation of Rites (on which Bugnini did not sit) to review these points. This they did on July 19, 1955, voting unanimously that these revised rites be approved and proscribed, subject to the approval of the Holy Father. Pope Pius XII did approve them, and they were mandated as of November 16, 1955 by a General Decree and Instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Rites [AAS 47-838] in these words: "Those who follow the Roman Rite are bound in the future to follow the Restored Ordo for Holy Week set forth in the original Vatican edition. Those who follow other Latin Rites are bound to follow only the time established in the new liturgical services. The Ordo must be followed from March 25, the second Sunday of Passiontide or Palm Sunday, 1956. . ." That this Instruction was considered "official" we can understand when the same Congregation issued some clarifications of the pastoral observances of the restored rites on February 1, 1957 [AAS 49-91] noting that this liturgical restoration of Holy Week was "promulgated" and that it must be observed "all things contrary notwithstanding." Therefore, the primary reason why these restored rites are observed by many of the traditional clergy is one of obedience to these decrees. The spirit of obedience looks at the command given,

not at the personal likes and dislikes of what is commanded, as long as what is commanded is not sinful.

For those who recognize that the present claimants to the Chair of Peter have no authority in the Church, it is stated that the Church is in a period of *interregnum*, meaning, in brief, that the Church finds Herself "between the reigns" of two popes, even through this period of time has been extended quite lengthily. During such a period of time, it is imperative that the clergy of all ranks maintain those practices and mandates of the previous Holy Father because, in reality, there is no one in the Church right now who has the authority to change them. While we may operate in certain instances under the reasoning of "epikeia" (a reason which, at times, turns into an excuse for a selfish abuse), there are certain circumstances that prevent us from doing this. Some say that a future Holy Father would surely abolish such rites, bordering as they do on the liturgical abuses found in the *Novus Ordo Missae* of Paul VI. Thus (they say) they can justify anticipating such an action of taking it on themselves to return to the pre-1956 rites in their own chapels. However, epikeia can only be used to follow the mind of the lawgiver already known and expressed, not the anticipation of a future command by someone whose mind on a certain topic is not exactly known. Therefore, it seems that invoking epikeia in this instance would be an improper application of this principle and not in keeping

with the spirit of obedience to what has been obviously mandated.

Besides, if we are attempting to invoke the "mind of the lawgiver" as the justification for abandoning the revised rites, then to which lawgiver are we appealing? If not Pope Pius XII, then who? Pope Pius XI? Pope Benedict XV? Pope St. Pius X? St. Peter? The fall-back position seems to be to the reign of Pope St. Pius X, or at least the "Pius X" rites. But the "mind" of this saintly Pope is well known. Not too long before his death (October 23, 1913), St. Pius X issued a *motu proprio* entitled *Abhinc duos annos*, also known as "Toward a Liturgical Reform." In this he tells us of his "desire" to change the composition of the Breviary. He undertook a new arrangement of the Psalter, anticipating the "update" of the Scriptures that he had already set in motion a few years before. Therefore, the "new Psalter" published under the reign of Pope Pius XII is nothing but a final expression of that which St. Pius X desired. Yes, for some the "new Psalter" does not have the same "flavor" as the "old" one, and some even appeal to nostalgia by saying that the "new Psalter" is not the language of the Psalms that many saints have prayed over the centuries. Without attempting to sound cavalier, but to these comments I ask: "So what?" Does the Church have the right to make these changes? Yes, She does. Shall we blame all of the liturgical revisions on the Modernist innovators? it is obvious that we

cannot. Where, then, is the spirit of obedience to the Church to do all we are asked to do, especially in the public liturgical rites, even if we don't "like" them? Is this true, supernatural obedience?

2. It is a well established liturgical and sacramental principle that to the Church is given the right to change those ceremonies which She Herself has made. The Council of Trent, Pope St. Pius X, Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII (just to name a few authorities in the Church) all state this "permission", noting that the Church had no "power" or "right" over the "substance" of a Sacrament. This "substance" is defined as the essential words of the form of the Sacrament, which words the Church recognizes as "having received from the Apostles, and the Apostles from Christ" (Pope Innocent III, *Cum Marthae Circa*). [These are not necessarily the "theological substance" that some theologians like to debate about, but are rather the essential words of the rite as determined by the Church, which sometimes contradicts the "opinions" of some theologians (as in the case of the Holy Eucharist). It is the definition of the Church in this matter that is essential, not the opinions of the minimists.] The Council of Trent has stated (Session VII, Canon 13 on the Sacraments) that any pastor who would dare to change the substance of the rites is declared anathema. The "substance", then, is the

only unchangeable portion of the liturgical rites. As for the rest, the Church has both the power to change them, and the right to do so if She so chooses. Such changes are always accompanied by sound, pastoral reasons.

Now, all the objections raise by Fr. Ricossa (and others) about the loss to the spirit of the liturgy by the restored Holy Week rites affects not the "substance" of a Sacrament, but the rites themselves, which rites were instituted by the Church over the centuries. These objections fail in merit when we understand that: 1) these rites have been mandated by a legitimate Holy Father, and 2) the Church has the power and the right to make these changes. It can be assured that many of the traditional clergy who observe these restored rites are **equally saddened** by some (if not many) of the changes, but in the spirit of obedience they follow what the Church has mandated until someone with authority declares otherwise. To return to the use of the older rites is not a permission that can be "assumed".

3. It is important to note that the innovators did use the promulgation of the restored rites to further their aims of liturgical abuse. However, it cannot be said that those in charge were totally asleep at the wheel when this occurred. For example: A *Monitum* was issued by the Holy Office on July 24, 1958 [AAS 50-536] correcting an abuse creeping in

among the innovators. "This Supreme Sacred Congregation has learned that in a certain translation of the new rites of Holy Week into the vernacular, the words *mysterium fidei* in the form of the Consecration of the chalice are omitted. It is also reported that some priests omit these words in the very celebration of Mass. Therefore this Supreme Congregation gives warning that it is impious to introduce a change in so sacred a matter and to mutilate or alter editions of liturgical books (cf. Canon 1399, 10). Bishops, therefore, in accordance with the warnings of the Holy Office of February 14, 1958 [AAS 50-114], should see to it that the prescriptions of the sacred canons on divine worship be strictly observed, and they should be closely watchful that no one dare to introduce even the slightest change in the matter and form of the Sacraments."

The Holy Office, then, was not a "rubber stamp" office for Bugnini and company under the reign of Pope Pius XII in the area of the restored rites of Holy Week. Rather, this one *Monitum* demonstrates the efforts being made just before the death of Pope Pius XII of keeping the growing efforts of innovators in check. This same Holy Office did not question the legitimacy of the restored rites — only the abuses stemming from their promulgation.

4. The General Decree and Instruction of November 16, 1955, makes note that in some parishes or among some elderly

clergy, the observance of the restored rites will not be able to be performed for some legitimate pastoral reason. The Instruction gives an approval under these limited circumstances for an exemption from the requirement to observe the restored rites, however, this permission DOES NOT extend to the time observance. ALL are bound to observe the times of day as found in the restored rites, and to this there are no exceptions. Two observations:

1) Many who continue to follow the old rites still observe the old times. While one may hold sympathy for their reasons for maintaining the old rites, one cannot understand the justification to disobey the prescription of the times of day.

2) The exemption seems to be given only to those parishes already in existence and those members of the clergy alive at the time. It cannot be read into it a general permission for anyone at any future date to set aside the mandate of the General Instructions no matter what the justifying reason.

5. The restoration of the rites of Holy Week was the occasion Pope Pius XII used to loosen the requirement for the Communion fast. Was this change also “Bugnini inspired”? If so, do those who choose to observe the older rites also reject the three hour fast before Holy Communion? No, most don’t — an inconsistency that is well worth noting.

Let's return, now, to the original point. The infallibility of a liturgical rite has to do with its freedom from doctrinal error, which freedom comes from the fact of it being promulgated by legitimate authority. All of the reasons given by Fr. Ricossa regarding his preferences for the old rites of Holy Week are not concerned with *doctrinal* error — not one of them. That he considers them "bad" is not to be equated with the terminology of the Society of St. Pius X in calling the *Novus Ordo Missae* "bad." SSPX uses that term in a very weak sense. The *Novus Ordo Missae* contains doctrinal errors in several areas: the destruction of the proper intent in the prayers of the "Offertory," the change in the substance of the rite in the consecration form for the bread, and, most especially, for the wine. These are not just "bad" things — liturgical abuses that crept in due to a modernist influence. Rather, these are doctrinal errors, which errors invalidate the rite to the point that Christ does not come down on the altar in the *Novus Ordo Missae* of Paul VI — in its Latin edition, or in any of the vernacular editions approved by the ICEL. In the *Novus Ordo Missae*, the substance of the Sacrament has been altered; in the restored rites of Holy Week, this is not the case. While some may be disappointed at the work of Pope Pius XII in permitting the restored rites, such an action does not take away the fact that he was a legitimate pope. On the contrary, the doctrinal errors promulgated by Paul VI in his *Novus Ordo*

Missae do lend credence to the claim that he could not have been a legitimate Holy Father.

Therefore, I observe the “reformed” rites promulgated during the reign of Pope Pius XII in a spirit of Fourth Commandment obedience to legitimate authority. This obedience is supernatural (the catechism teaches) when we obey all legitimate commands — especially the ones we do not personally like — for the love of God and to renounce ourselves (as the Gospel commands). Am I saddened by some of these “reforms”? Yes, but, to me, presuming to stop their observance is disobedience, tantamount to expressing a spirit that is contrary to the obedience we profess toward God and His Church. What is more, for me, presuming to stop the observances of the “reforms” is on the same level as being too comfortable with the condition the Church is in right now, assuming that we can make changes in the rites, invoking epikeia in a manner I can’t imagine the lawgiver wishing us to. With this state of being comfortable comes a frame of mind that ceases working for a Restoration in every way we can. If we do not feel the sting of obedience to the Church from time to time, especially in things that go against personal preference, then from what source will the graces come to heal the wound that our Mother, the Church, is suffering at this time?

